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**HEADLINE:** West backs Utah \$\$ bid

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**BODY:**

LAKE TAHOE, Nev. -- Talk about an easy sell . . . so far.

As states reel from billions of dollars in budgetary red ink, Western state lawmakers Friday unanimously backed a Utah-generated initiative to hit up the federal government for billions of dollars they say schools are losing under federal land policies.

Utah House Speaker Marty Stephens, R-Farr West; Majority Leader Tom Hatch, R-Panguitch; and Rep. Steve Urquhart, R-St. George, pitched the idea to the Council of State Governments-WEST's executive committee, meeting at Lake Tahoe.

"The time is right to examine the fairness issues of federal land ownership," Arizona Democratic Sen. Herb Guenther said.

"I'm astounded by this presentation and how inequitable the funding is for **education** in the United States," Republican California Assembly member Charlene Zettel said.

"Clearly, what is happening here is we have less resources in our ability to generate money . . . , and I think the federal law says (the nation) needs to provide an equitable **education**. They're preventing us from doing that," said CSG-WEST chairman Lynn Hettrick, Nevada Assembly minority leader.

Despite their enthusiasm, Western leaders have a tough battle ahead: selling the idea to Congress.

The proposal is being called the "**Action Plan for Public Lands and Education**" -- or APPLE.

APPLE is rooted in Utah's public **education** funding problems. The state provides the least funding per student in the country despite a relatively high tax burden. The matter often is attributed to demographics: about one of

every four Utah residents is school-aged.

But Stephens, who is seeking a rare third term as Utah House speaker this year, has found data showing Utah's problems are shared around the West.

The common thread: The federal government owns an average of 52 percent of land within the boundaries of the 11 Western states, Hawaii and Alaska.

By comparison, federal parcels make up an average 4 percent of other states' lands.

Federal land policies prohibit states from collecting taxes and receiving full royalties from developing natural resources on those parcels.

So, the Utah trio wants the federal government to pony up \$14 billion the West would receive if federal lands were sold down to other state averages. They also want \$6.4 billion a year to compensate the West for lost taxes and royalties.

The proposal does not ask the federal government to sell its land.

Rather, reimbursement money would come from federal revenue growth and through urging the federal government to swap non-wilderness lands for state gain.

Urquhart, Hatch and Stephens, who has amassed a hefty legislative campaign account and is said to be eyeing the 2004 governor's race, last week received overwhelming support for their crusade from Utah **education** and school trust lands groups and the Utah Taxpayers Association.

On Friday the executive committee of CSG-WEST, whose meeting wrapped up a week of seminars on Western issues from water conflicts to energy crises, unanimously endorsed APPLE through a resolution. About 20 of 68 executive committee members attended; seven were from Utah.

Hettrick, who is looking to the chairmanship of the national CSG, suggested presenting the idea in each Western state to ensure support. Stephens himself could help forward the initiative as the 2003 president of the National Conference of State Legislators.

The committee will send resolution copies to President Bush and congressional leaders and will assemble a group to prepare an initiative for congressional consideration.

Several committee members believe their statehouses would get on board. Hawaii Senate Ways and Means Chairman Brian Taniguchi, however, said the immediacy might not be felt in his state, where such federal land issues don't exist.

That lack of impact in other states conceivably could be an obstacle to selling APPLE to Congress. Also, the federal budget is expected to post a deficit for the first time since 1997. Nor do Washington's political powerhouses live out West.

California has political muscle, though, and if Western congressional delegations put their weight behind APPLE, it could become a 2004 presidential campaign issue, as Stephens hopes.

But, California's Zettel acknowledges, "it will take time to build support and awareness" for the cause.

Guenther agrees.

"I don't suspect it to be an easy task."